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ABSTRACT

The purposes of the study were: (1) to define the campus Ombudsman; (2) to review the circumstances leading to his appearance on the academic scene, (3) to describe his activities, and (4) to analyze the effects of his activities. Campus Ombudsmen were interviewed at six institutions including: the University of California at Berkeley, Columbia University, University of Detroit, Michigan State University, San Diego State College, and San Jose State College. Students who consulted the campus Ombudsman at Michigan State University during Fall 1968 were surveyed. This abstract of the study summarizes the major findings of the four areas investigated and concludes that "even when performing effectively, the campus Ombudsman cannot ward off major student confrontations of a political nature challenging the organizational structure of the institution. The position requires an organizational structure which is relatively stable, supported and trusted by most of its people within it most of time. It is intended to make a system of government function as designed rather than to restructure the system." (AF)

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A STUDY OF THE CAMPUS OMBUDSMAN IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION WITH EMPHASIS ON MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

By

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AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

A STUDY OF THE CAMPUS OMBUDSMAN IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION WITH EMPHASIS ON MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

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The purposes of this study were: to define the campus ombudsman, to review the circumstances leading to his appearance on the academic scene, to describe his activities, and to analyze the effects of his activities. Campus ombudsmen at six institutions of higher education were interviewed: University of California at Berkeley, Columbia University, University of Detroit, Michigan State University, San Diego State College and San Jose State College. Students who consulted the campus ombudsman at Michigan State University during the 1968 fall term were surveyed.

Three simultaneous developments led to the appointment of campus ombudsmen at fourteen or more colleges and universities in the United States by the end of 1968. One was the increasing dominance of large-scale formal organizations in modern society,

accentuating the asymmetry in size and power between the individual and the organization. Another was rapid enrollment growth at institutions of higher education, expanding many of them into complex, quasi-bureaucratic organizations. By the mid-1960's, students had begun to react against individual neglect and abuse within the impersonal organization. The third development was the spread of the ombudsman concept in civil government.

Of Scandinavian origin, the civil ombudsman is an independent, high-level officer who receives complaints, makes inquiries and recommends appropriate action. His remedial weapons are persuasion, criticism and publicity. He cannot reverse administrative action.

The campus ombudsman, modeled primarily on the Danish civil ombudsman, is defined as an independent faculty member who receives complaints, mainly from students, at a college or university. He makes inquiries and recommends appropriate action. His remedial weapons are persuasion and criticism. He cannot reverse administrative or academic action. His chief responsibility is to help resolve individual student grievances. His secondary responsibility is to seek procedural changes to reduce grievances. His objective is to improve rather than replace the existing system.

Both the civil ombudsman and campus ombudsman are auxiliary to, not replacements for, existing functionaries.

The method of selection and the person selected were found to be crucial in the establishment of the campus ombudsman position. He may be selected by any power group or combination of power groups at his institution. The manner of selection usually is consistent with the institution's power emphasis.

Institutions with campus ombudsmen range in size from large universities to small colleges. At Michigan State University, all class ranks and student age groups were represented by students who consulted that institution's ombudsman. On a proportional basis, upperclassmen, male students and married students were more inclined to consult the ombudsman while underclassmen, female students and single students were less inclined. Students from certain colleges--particularly Arts and Letters and University College--were "over represented" in the ombudsman's office while students from other colleges--particularly Education and Natural Science--were "under represented."

Four differences distinguish the campus ombudsman from the chief student affairs officer. The ombudsman has no staff, considers student academic as well as non-academic problems, is not involved in student disciplinary matters, and has more investigatory authority.

Two-thirds of the 218 surveyed students who consulted the Michigan State University ombudsman indicated that he helped relieve

student frustration and hostility. Nearly half of the respondents considered the problems they took to the ombudsman "completely solved" while one-third replied "not solved at all." None thought the functions of the ombudsman should be discontinued, although one-third recommended changes. Nearly three-fourths of the surveyed students would have consulted the ombudsman even if his records were open for public inspection. Thirteen of 207 respondents claimed to have experienced "unpleasant treatment" by anyone involved in their complaint after consulting the ombudsman. Nearly all surveyed students would return to the ombudsman with other problems and recommend him to other students.

Traits selected by surveyed students as most important for a campus ombudsman to have were, in descending order: knowledge of campus operations and regulations, understanding, effectiveness, authority and accessibility. A non-teaching faculty member (administrator) was their first choice for an ombudsman. The preferred method of filling the position was selection by administration, faculty and students. A term of office extending beyond two years was highly favored.

A campus ombudsman model proposed by the author included these features:

Long-time, highly-respected, well-paid faculty member relieved of teaching duties; selected by a committee representing

students, faculty and administration; appointed for renewable two-year term by institution's governing board; private office separate from main administration building easily accessible to students; receptive to individual student grievances concerning the institution, both academic and non-academic; uses reasoned persuasion to bring about expeditious redress of genuine grievances; detects patterns of grievances and works for changes to end them; has access to nearly all campus files; keeps written confidential records; makes periodic reports; appeals to organizational superiors or chief administrative officer when rebuffed; has no power to take disciplinary action, reverse decisions or circumvent regulations.

The author concluded that even when performing effectively, the campus ombudsman cannot ward off major student confrontations of a political nature challenging the organizational structure of the institution. Like the civil ombudsman, the position requires an organizational structure which is relatively stable, supported and trusted by most of the people within it most of the time. It is intended to make a system of government function as designed rather than to restructure the system.